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SUBJECT: VOA HORN OF AFRICA SERVICE CHIEF DISCUSSES VOA
ACCESS WITH PRIME MINISTER ADVISOR BEREKET

Summary

1. (SBU) Voice of America (VOA) Horn of Africa Service Chief David Arnold met with Advisor to the Prime Minister Bereket Simon on October 23 to request the Ethiopian government (GoE) to consider favorably VOA applications for licenses for VOA reporters (local stringers) to be based outside Addis Ababa and to urge the GoE to grant VOA reporters greater access to senior GoE officials, especially on stories related to Ethiopia's progress on, and challenges with, development. Bereket said he did not think the Ethiopian government would be inclined to grant additional licenses, citing the Ethiopian government's negative perception of VOA's coverage of Ethiopia at this time, but said that he would discuss the matter with his colleagues. Arnold said VOA's coverage is fair and balanced and urged Bereket to communicate the GoE's concerns regularly and specifically to VOA in Washington. The Embassy's Information Officer and Political Officer accompanied Arnold. End Summary.

A Sour Relationship

2. (SBU) Bereket said that the GoE-VOA relationship "has been soured" for several years. He insisted that the GoE has "never attacked VOA, but VOA works seriously to derail Ethiopia's whole (development and reform) process," charging that VOA encourages violent opposition groups through its "unfounded reports." "VOA is not doing its job professionally," Bereket said, adding that the GoE has "repeatedly appealed to all responsible parties within VOA but has never received an encouraging response." Pressed by Arnold for specifics, Bereket says VOA operates in Ethiopia with a "Cold War mentality." "Why," Bereket said, emphasizing that he was expressing his personal view, "do we even need VOA in Ethiopia?" "VOA creates havoc," he added, "that's how we see it."

3. (SBU) Bereket insisted that the GoE still seeks a good working relationship with VOA. Nonetheless, he cited a recent VOA article on Ethiopian Airlines as unnecessarily critical and therefore harmful to Ethiopia's image. Bereket says Ethiopian policymakers must balance the need for Ethiopians' access to information and the need to ensure that "negative oriented media" does not derail Ethiopia's progress. In response, Arnold said VOA maintains rigorous professional standards and objectivity and pressed Bereket to communicate any specific concerns with VOA Washington on a regular basis, so that VOA can work with the GoE most

effectively to address such concerns. Bereket replied that the if the Ethiopian government raised every concern, "we would be asking for a correction every day, and we have other jobs to do. We've given up hope on trying to compile all the negative campaigns by VOA." Arnold noted that the VOA has very little access to senior Ethiopian officials, and greater access would permit VOA to provide greater coverage of the GoE's perspective. Bereket said such access might be possible.

Bereket: VOA Works With Those Who Promote Instability

¶4. (SBU) The Ethiopian government monitors VOA daily, Bereket said, adding that senior officials do not listen to VOA because it is a "biased and prejudiced media outlet." Bereket explained that "We know most of the people working at VOA because we fought together in the liberation struggle. We know that they are very powerful, 'untouchables,' so we can't predict a significant paradigm shift in VOA. We know VOA leadership in Washington thinks the coverage is fine, and will be rated highly in your internal evaluations, but we on the receiving end have a different perspective. We are trying to stabilize the country, fight terrorism, promote development and democratize. For us, improving VOA has become a dead end. Our goal now is simply to give a local alternative to Ethiopian listeners. We can just try to rebut (VOA mis/disinformation) using our own media."

Bereket: Ethiopians Need Unbiased Information

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¶5. (SBU) Arnold responded that, while GoE views are clear, VOA seeks to tell relevant stories about the challenges and progress of Ethiopians from all parts of the country. Arnold added that additional VOA reporters in Ethiopia would only enhance, not detract from, VOA's coverage. Bereket was reluctant to agree to expansion of VOA's service in Ethiopia, noting, "Expansion of service at this time would lead to a worsening of the relationship. It would be difficult to comprehend. 'Ethiopian Idol' (or similar entertainment programs) might be okay, but it would be offset by VOA's campaigns against Ethiopian Airlines and the Ethiopian government. The 2010 elections are approaching and Ethiopians need nonpartisan, unbiased information." Bereket acknowledged that VOA as an organization primarily "has the independent interests of the American people at heart - and we respect that," but added that "(some members of VOA) are working hand in hand with people trying to destabilize the whole country."

¶6. (SBU) Arnold noted that a free press and greater access by journalists to a broad cross-section of the population is important for any democratization process. Bereket, however, retorted that should the Ethiopian government "start giving licenses and then revoking them, we will be portrayed as a country that is against the media. We can't abide by the relentless campaigns against us, and although we have never spoken a word against the United States, we are attacked for our supposed mistakes. We are asking for fair treatment, and I see no encouraging signs." Bereket agreed finally to discuss the possibility of additional licenses for VOA reporters "with my colleagues," but added his personal opinion that "what good would it do for Ethiopia? More damage would not help."

¶7. (U) David Arnold did not have the opportunity to review this cable prior to his departure from Ethiopia.
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